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SUBJECT: PARTIES AGREE TO TALK AMID QUIET START TO THE STAY AWAY

REF: MASERU 261

¶1. SUMMARY: Monday morning was unusually quiet in Maseru on August 3, the first day of the general strike called by the opposition parties to protest the allocation of proportional representation seats in parliament following the 2007 national election. Some taxis were running, but streets were largely empty, with many workers staying home due to fears about security; no incidents of violence have been reported. The government broke the quiet by announcing that it had agreed to sit down with opposition party leaders on Tuesday, August 4, to discuss the dispute with the help of local Anglican Bishop Mokuku, who will act as mediator. End Summary.

¶2. The normally bustling city of Maseru was unusually quiet with the start of the stay away. Police and soldiers had been manning checkpoints and patrolling extra routes since nightfall the day before, to ensure that opposition supporters were not out in the streets to "enforce" the strike. Extra armed and unarmed police were deployed throughout the city, particularly in the downtown area, early on Monday morning. The border crossing was open and well-staffed, but traffic there was very light. There have been no reported incidents of violence.

¶3. Although the transport association did not formally endorse the strike, some individual taxi owners were supporting it; as a result, traffic was very light. In addition, many workers stayed home, either because their employers had preemptively closed for fear of violence or because individuals were being cautious, unsure about the safety of the streets. Government buses, some escorted by police, were deployed along the main roads to ensure that there was sufficient transport for all workers. The industrial center was the only area of the city that was busy as usual, with workers reporting for duty and street vendors present as normal.

¶4. Meanwhile, on Monday morning press reports indicated that the governing Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) had agreed to call a meeting with the opposition leaders to discuss the dispute, as mentioned by Foreign Minister Tsekoa last week (reftel). Post contacts confirmed that the Christian Council of Lesotho and the Lesotho Council of NGOs met with opposition parties, the LCD, and the Independent Electoral Commission over the weekend to attempt to break the impasse. All parties have now agreed to hold talks on the dispute with Anglican Bishop Mokuku as the local mediator, beginning on August 4. It is not clear whether reallocation of seats will be on the agenda.

¶5. Post will continue to provide updates to the situation as it develops.

